

Participating Far From Home

The Civic and Political Engagement of Displaced Syrians

Margot Mayoraz

Working Paper 04.2023

Imprint

Participating far from home:

The civic and political engagement of displaced Syrians

Publisher

Swiss Peace Foundation - swisspeace

The Working Paper Series

In its working paper series, swisspeace publishes original contributions by staff members and international experts, covering current issues in peace research and peacebuilding. Please refer to our publication list at the end of this paper or on www.swisspeace.ch/publications.

The views expressed in this working paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the swisspeace standpoint.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this paper would not have been possible without the help of my very supportive colleagues at swisspeace. I am especially thankful to my supervisor Ahmed Eleiba, for his trust and our numerous conversations around this paper, and to Jibril Kallas, for the hours preparing, conducting and discussing research interviews in Arabic. I would also like to heartfully thank all research participants who agreed to answer my questions, either formally or informally, to construct this paper. Your time, input and dedication really impressed me, and I hope to give them the space they deserve in this paper. Finally, this research process has been an intense learning process, and I am very grateful to people in my closest circle who supported me along the way.

Keywords

diaspora, IDPs, Syria, civic and political rights

swisspeace
Kasernenhof 8
4058 Basel
Switzerland
www.swisspeace.ch
info@swisspeace.ch

© 2023 swisspeace

Table of Contents

List of Acronyms

Abstract

1	Introduction	1
2	Civic and political engagement by the Syrian displaced	3
3	Participating far from home: The Syrian diaspora in Germany	10
4	So close yet so far: IDPs' participation	17
5	Conclusion: The civic and political rights of the displaced, a tool for peace?	22
6	Bibliography and further references	25
	swisspeace publications	28

List of Acronyms

AFD	Alternative für Deutschland
EU	European Union
GCM	Global Compact for Migration
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IO	International organization
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council

Abstract

This paper explores the civic and political participation of displaced Syrians in the affairs of their country. Through a comparative study relying on desk reviews and key informant interviews, it outlines the multi-level obstacles to formal and informal participation for Syrians displaced in Germany and in non-government-controlled Syrian areas. Opportunities for participation provided by displacement are also uncovered, both in Syria and in Germany. This paper argues that the restricted civic and political participation of the displaced remains a hinderance to restoring social cohesion among Syrians. Therefore, it suggests considering the civic and political rights of the displaced as a necessary tool to move towards a national reconciliation at different levels of various political processes, at home or internationally.

1 Introduction

1. RESEARCH RATIONALE

When forcibly displaced, either inside or outside of one's country, to which extent can one keep participating in the civic and political affairs of their home country? This research aims at exploring the challenges and opportunities for the Syrian displaced to engage in the affairs of their country, far from home.

In the Syrian context, the United Nations (UN) led political process has not lent sufficient focus to engaging Syrian refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). The scale of internal and external displacement; at half the pre-war population, results in a wide exclusion from the ongoing political process which is supposed to shape the future of the country (Ragab 2020). Since most refugees and IDPs position themselves against the Assad government, a significant share of the population representing a set of political opinions risks losing its space in the Syrian society (Batrawi and Uzelac 2018). Consequently, discussions on topics such as the voluntary, safe, and dignified IDP and refugee return to Syria are not progressing. Amidst the recent normalization of relations between the Syrian government and several Arab states bilaterally, as well as the League of Arab States, forced returns of refugees have become a serious threat (Batrawi and Uzelac 2018; CNN 2023). Yet, the inclusion of refugees in a new social contract is most likely to ensure durable, sustainable and voluntary repatriation (Geoff 2018): engaging with the displaced therefore contributes to the search for durable solutions to displacement. Moreover, their inclusion would benefit the execution of peace agreements as it addresses the root causes of conflict (Janmyr 2015) and would bring added value in terms of reconstruction activities (Bekaj and Antara 2018).

Given the lack of inclusion of Syrians self-identifying as IDPs and refugees at the formal and international levels, this research explores other pathways in which displaced Syrians participate in the civic and political spaces of their country. It focuses on comparing the possibilities for participation of the Syrian diaspora in Germany, and the internally displaced to non-government-controlled areas in Syria. The following sections of this chapter will provide a brief background on the Syrian civil society participation, and present narratives around how research participants grasp the post-conflict phase. Chapter II gives an overview of the civic and political engagement of the Syrian diaspora and IDPs, outlining the concept of diaspora mobilization, and introducing a 3-variable framework explaining their participation. Chapter III covers the participation of the Syrian diaspora in Germany, by presenting the context in which it evolves, their motivations, the challenges for participation induced by displacement, and the opportunities for participation provided by displacement. Chapter IV applies the same structure to IDPs' participation. Finally, Chapter V concludes and suggests recommendations for engagement with the Syrian diaspora and with IDPs.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is the result of a six-month intensive research. It adopts a qualitative methodology and is based on extensive desk review of secondary sources on diaspora mobilization focusing on Syrian diaspora. Moreover, 19 key informant interviews were conducted between April and June 2023 with displaced Syrians in Germany, internally displaced Syrians to non-government-controlled areas and experts working on Syrian

displacement. Participants are involved in various forms in civic and/or political participation in dealing with the consequences of the Syrian conflict. The goal of the research is to highlight Syrian voices, and participants were thus interviewed in their personal capacity, not as the potential organizations they represent. For this reason, their anonymity is preserved.

The author explained to the respondents the purpose of the research and interview conditions ahead of the interview and obtained their informed consent. Most interviews were conducted in English, some in German and some in Arabic. The interviewees are a diverse group in terms of origin, age, and gender. Interviews were semi-structured, and elements extracted from the interviews were used to inform the structure of the paper and classified according to a multi-level framework for diaspora mobilization presented in section II.3. Unless mentioned otherwise, the findings presented in this paper are based on data analysis from the interviews. The quotes at the beginning of sections also originate from interviews.

3. BACKGROUND ON SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

Prior to the 2011 uprising in Syria, civil society was limited in size, heavily restricted, monitored and suppressed. The Syrian government was known for a historic intolerance to independent organizing and civil society work outside of the official structures (Syrian Civil Society Network Platform 2022). Yet, since 2011, civil society has been extending its work and has been at the frontline of the response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. The 2011 uprisings also gave women in particular a wider space to participate in civil society activities, which fluctuated in the following years because of the presence of Daesh, the lack of tangible results as well as the unclear political role for women.

Yet, Syrian civil society faced important challenges in shaping its role in the conflict context, such as the disintegration of political authority, the emergence of extremist groups, and internal issues of politicization, polarization, and lack of coordination. These elements prevented civil society from creating a meaningful shift towards a democratic paradigm. Moreover, civil society and citizens' participation remain relatively new concepts in Syria, still lacking a culture around civil society work. This manifests by little coordination and weak cooperation within and between organizations, which remain largely personality-driven (Eleiba et al. 2016). After an 'initial period of chaos' in responding to increasing humanitarian needs, networks constituted in order to coordinate the work of various civil society organizations in non-government-controlled areas and neighboring countries (Syrian Civil Society Network Platform 2022, 4).

At the international level, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 stresses the participation of the Syrian people in the determination of the country's future. The resolution aims, among others, at convening representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations, drafting a new constitution and organizing free and fair elections under UN supervision, and building conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas (United Nations Security Council 2015). Yet, the political process of formal talks is deadlocked, and civil society has therefore limited possibilities to participate, except through a few platforms such as the Civil Society Support Room (see UN DPPA 2021). This situation prevents the voices from the Syrian civil society to be heard in this framework. While they are consulted on preparatory measures, there is no setting in which they can contribute to operative decisions. Moreover, there is no official body representing Syrian refugees in the UN-led process, and little progress has been made on the topic of a safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and IDPs. Neglecting this point could negatively impact the establishment of peace in Syria, since more than half of the population has been displaced (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity 2021b). In these circumstances, the Syrian civil society and especially people who have been forcibly displaced are using other means to organize and to participate in the public affairs of their country, even if their room for impact is limited by strict government rules.

2 Civic and political engagement by the Syrian displaced

1. SYRIAN DIASPORA AND DIASPORA MOBILIZATION

For the purpose of this paper, a Syrian displaced person is considered to be every person who was forced to leave their village, city, or district of origin for reasons directly related to the conflict and violence in the country in any period of time after March 2011, either to another area within the political borders of Syria, as an internally displaced person, or to any country outside Syria, as a refugee (The Day After 2022, 105). Syria's ten years of conflict has left 6.8 million Syrians internally displaced and made 6.8 million other people refugees, among which more than 660'000 are in Germany (UNHCR 2022a).

Regarding the definition of the diaspora, this paper adopts the position outlined by Ragab (2020), going beyond the traditional definition of diaspora based on ethno-nationalist criteria. This definition considers it 'a group of people dispersed in other countries maintaining a collective national, cultural or religious identity, with a strong, and often idealized, sense of belonging to a real or imagined homeland' (Ragab 2020, 24). Yet, this definition is criticized for being essentialist and considering a 'homogeneous dispersed population with historically fixed identity and values', so Ragab calls for differentiating among immigrant population and considering the diaspora as a process. She thus speaks of diasporic practices instead of diaspora per se, since 'diasporas are not natural entities resulting simply out of migration, but instead a product of an active process of transnational mobilization' conducted by diasporic political entrepreneurs (Ragab 2020, 24–25).

Diaspora mobilization is the practice of aiming at exerting influence on the homeland's political situation. This can be realized in a direct way – through networks and links with political actors and organizations – or indirectly through awareness raising, capacity building, providing material support or dialogue among groups either in the host country or origin country (Ragab 2020, 26). Since lines of contestation from cultural, religious or ethnic differences or based on social, political and economic hierarchies manifest among the diaspora, it cannot be regarded per se as an agent of peace or of war in its political mobilization (Bekaj and Antara 2018).

Moreover, diaspora mobilization is influenced by conflict dynamics, with fragmentations engendered by the conflict reflecting in the Syrian diaspora: while the 2011 uprisings had a unifying effect, the political, ethnic and religious tensions that followed in the escalation of the conflict are mirrored in the Syrian diaspora in Europe (Ragab and Katbeh 2017). More generally, diaspora mobilization depends on the phase of the conflict: during an ongoing conflict, diaspora activism focuses on advocacy and lobbying towards the host government or international community, sending humanitarian aid or financial support to various groups, or mobilizing public opinions through media campaigns or demonstrations. After the conflict, the mobilization depends on the outcome and the related position of the diaspora. During a peace process phase, the diaspora can either support or spoil the process, get involved as a third party, facilitate the host country's engagement in peace for the homeland, or take part in negotiations. For reconstruction and development, diaspora groups can make investments and support development projects, participate in return migration, or cultivate their own perception of the national community. Regarding transnational

justice, the role of the diaspora surrounds the lobbying for the recognition of war crimes – abroad under universal jurisdiction if the justice system in the home state is unable to proceed – and take part in healing and reconciliation efforts (Toivanen and Baser 2020; Diker and Ragab 2019). As will be shown in section 5 of this chapter, there is no consensus about the phase Syria currently finds itself, resulting in different forms of diaspora mobilization.

The Syrian diaspora mobilization and participation also strongly depends on the location of asylum: refugees residing in countries with a strong democratic tradition and freedoms of speech and expression are considered having more economic, cultural and social capital than those in neighboring countries, given the selectivity of migration processes. These elements theoretically endow those further with a greater ability to exert influence on the Syrian affairs, especially to broadcast liberal and democratic norms. However, the distance reduces their access to information and to cross-border exchanges, which potentially alter their imagination of their national community compared to the local aspirations of the homeland (Van Hear and Cohen 2017; Diker and Ragab 2019). The Syrian government categorizes refugees in ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ people, whose return they either prevent through discouragement by economic, political or military means, or strategically organize, in partnership with neighboring countries such as Lebanon (Batrawi and Uzelac 2018).

2. INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS’ PARTICIPATION

As mentioned, there are around 6.8 million IDPs in Syria, mostly concentrated in the Idlib governorate (1.9 million, representing 28% of the governorate’s population), Aleppo governorate (1.2 million, 19%) and Rural Damascus governorate (1.1 million, 16%) (UNHCR 2022b).

There is generally little research on IDPs’ participation in Syria. This might be explained by the fact that it is sometimes difficult to categorize between IDPs and local communities, since for many of them displacement dates to several years, and they have integrated in local communities. Yet, as will be further shown, differences are still salient, especially about the topic of civic and political participation.

Overall, since IDPs are citizens of the country in which they are displaced, they are entitled to the same set of rights as non-displaced nationals, which include civic and political participation rights. Yet, IDPs worldwide face numerous obstacles to exercising them, which increases their social, political and economic marginalization (Global Protection Cluster and Carter Center 2018). For instance, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, ‘IDPs should have the choice to vote in their initial place of residence or in their area of displacement, and there should be no consequences on their ability to enjoy other rights or assistance’ (Global Protection Cluster and Carter Center 2018, 10).

3. MULTI-LEVEL FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATION

In her work on the Syrian diaspora in Germany, Ragab (2020) analyses transnational diaspora mobilization according to three levels. Each level of variables contains elements affecting motivations and possibilities for participation. This framework will be applied in this paper to analyze challenges related to the civic and political participation of both the Syrian diaspora in Germany and IDPs.

First, the **micro level** contains elements enabling or preventing participation from a personal perspective. It regroups variables such as the migrant's aspirations, sense of belonging, motivations, and personal characteristics such as level of income, social capital, gender, psychological situation. These are pre-conditions for cultivating links with the community of origin and engaging in transnational participation. Echoing the definition of the diaspora as a process instead of an essentialized community, diasporic practices highly depend on individual characteristics since they are contextual according to the personal situation of the migrant, and can evolve in time when those personal variables change (Van Hear and Cohen 2017; Ragab 2020).

The **meso level** relates to the construction of a 'diasporic consciousness' at the collective level, through collective identities and actions. It contains variables such as organizational framework and mobilizing structures, defined by the number and size of actors, degrees of formalization, operational focus and methods used.

Finally, the **macro level** covers the societal, legal, political and cultural environment defining opportunities for transnational practices. For instance, the level of freedom of speech or assembly in a society, or the (in)security from oppression by the origin country's government in the host country, greatly affect the possibilities for participation. Platforms provided by supranational institutions for dialogue and advocacy, international organizations priorities in support and donors' funding affect participation possibilities of the displaced too. International migration policies and national legal and institutional framework especially define civil rights of migrants and thus their ability to participate both in the affairs of host and origin country, for instance through acquiring citizenship or voting from abroad (Ragab 2020). From a social standpoint, the recognition by both host and origin states of the displaced as potential actors with agency to participate in political and civic spaces is also crucial in defining their role (Toivanen and Baser 2020). The macro-level also encompasses the effect of the conflict stage on diaspora participation: it is more likely to engage if a negotiated peace or settlement has been reached, but less in case of an outright military victory – a so-called 'victor's peace' – if the diaspora is on the losing side. In that case, it will resist subscribing to the victor's imagined community and maintain their own (Van Hear and Cohen 2017).

4. FORMAL, NON-FORMAL, CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: BLURRY BOUNDARIES

'Civic participation is when you advocate, political participation is when you go and negotiate'

When looking at civic and political participation, it is useful to differentiate between formal and non-formal participation. This section provides background on formal and non-formal participation in the Syrian context, connects them to understandings of political and civic participation, and finally expands on obstacles to participating in elections.

Formal participation can be defined as 'participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties and parliaments' (Bekaj and Antara 2018, 118). Participation in elections entails both running as candidate and voting. At the local level, participation in Local Administrative Councils also falls under formal participation. In

opposition-held Syria, Local Administrative Councils fulfill functions attempting to fill the void left by the Syrian government's retreat, such as service delivery, collecting taxes and civil registry, varying according to the region. Depending on the region, council members are either elected or selected (Hajjar et al. 2017).

According to the interviews conducted for this research, the Syrian understanding tends to equate political participation with formal participation, and civic participation with non-formal participation. When asked about the difference between civic and political participation, answers provided for the political participation related to direct participation in political parties or the peace process at the UN level, especially among IDPs. Moreover, the perception of political participation was generally negative, with the feeling that it was hollow, very limited and of little use, given the dictatorial character of the Syrian government and related little space for citizen participation. Political participation is also considered to have been weak before 2011: the demonstrations were a way to express this feeling of restraint. As researchers put it, 'the absence of a functioning democratic system seems to have intensified respondents' resistance to formal political systems' (Bekaj and Antara 2018, 17).

Interviewed Syrians in Germany on the other hand had a more nuanced understanding of political participation, considering civic participation as a part of political participation and attributing political significance to non-formal means of participation, considering again the dictatorial aspect of the government, which turns every action into a way of either showing support or resisting against it.

Given this limiting context, research participants were rather active in what they considered civic participation, namely non-formal participation. Such participation usually manifests itself through civil society organizations or community organizations and takes various forms, such as humanitarian support, awareness raising on democratic values, promoting human rights, capacity building for individuals and organizations, transitional justice, healing and reconstruction or intergroup exchanges for dialogue and negotiations.

A key element of transnational political activism is engaging with relevant actors, such as participating in existing bodies, encouraging host countries to act in their interest, engaging with international mediators, supporting the implementation of peace agreements and providing advice and context on the evolving situations (Ragab 2020). But for participants with little access to international arenas, civic participation also takes place through involvement in the public sphere at the very local level since they have no opportunity to participate at the formal, political level. Overall, civic participation is understood by respondents as peaceful, and its peak seems to have been between 2011 and 2014, before the mass dispersal of weapons across the country.

Research interviews showed that civic participation is considered necessary to create the conditions for meaningful political participation, for which a society with common values and identities is necessary. Civic participation was thus considered by respondents to be a way of mediating between state and society, in which everyone has an opportunity to participate. While the inclusion of the displaced in formal mechanisms is key to a long-term recovery, other forms of participation are often the only possibility for the diaspora and IDPs to participate, and these forms accommodate more skills and interests. While civic engagement cannot replace formal engagement in political life, it should be regarded as a first step towards

durable solutions to displacement (Bekaj and Antara 2018, 92). The development of civil society was described as a guarantee for stability in a future Syria.

ON SYRIAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

A strongly symbolic form of participating politically is being able to vote in and run for national elections. While a presidential election was organized in Syria in 2021, it fell short of meeting multiple international standards (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2021) and as elections of the past decades, they were considered a mere 'façade for democracy' (The Day After 2022, 7). Despite free and fair elections with the participation of out-of-country Syrians being an objective of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, several obstacles prevent their conduct.

While Syrians outside of the country are legally only allowed to participate in national elections, voting must be done through Syrian embassies. This requirement prevents many diaspora members to vote, due for instance to the absence of Syrian embassies in many countries of asylum or the prohibition by the host country for the embassy to host elections, as happened in Germany in 2021 (Talmon 2021). Moreover, diaspora members are often unable to reach embassies due to logistical or legal reasons, related to the fear of revocation of refugee status such as in Germany. Syrians also fear harsh treatment if they are government opponents, and mistrust embassies due to their intelligence activities which could be a threat for opponents' families (The Day After 2022). Finally, voting in embassies requires a valid Syrian passport with an exit stamp, which most of the people who fled the conflict do not have (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity 2021b). Regarding the possibility to run for office, Syrian diaspora members are de facto mostly excluded, since constitutional provisions require candidates among others to have continuously resided in Syria for the last ten years before applying to candidacy, not to hold any other nationality than the Syrian one, and not to be married to a non-Syrian (The Day After 2022).

Internally displaced Syrians also face legal restrictions in their right to vote. They must participate to local and legislative elections from their electoral domicile, which is their civil registration place of residence, to which most are unwilling to go back to for security, economic or political reasons and thus deprived from their right to vote (The Day After 2022). For the presidential election of 2021, IDPs could vote at any polling station in the country since it was held in a single nationwide constituency. Yet due to the absence of voters list or registration method for them, there is no data to estimate their participation in the election (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2021).

From a social perspective, participation to elections is also compromised by the lack of a safe environment in which Syrians can run for office or vote free of threat, intimidation and harassment. In 2020, the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity conducted a survey with 500 displaced Syrians, both in- and out-of-country, in which more than half of respondents reported that before their displacement, they voted because they were forced to do so. Less than 5% voted with complete conviction, and 85% believed that elections held by the government before 2011 were rigged. Moreover, 97% estimated that elections would not be free and fair unless the electoral process guaranteed displaced people's right to vote and to run for office (Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity 2021a). These elements point to a lack of trust of citizens towards the process, which is one of the biggest obstacles to credible elections as Syrians are not convinced of the usefulness of participating. If Syrians think that elections are a

‘farce that serve only to legitimize the regime’s rule’, convincing them that elections can produce tangible social changes is essential to obtain meaningful participation. A safe environment is the first condition for elections to be perceived as fair: ‘Syrians will view any attempt by the international community—through the UN or other international actors—to push for elections before a safe environment has been achieved as a move to legitimize the current head of the regime’ (Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity 2021a, 11).

Political obstacles such as the demographic changes caused by the conflict and actively pursued by the Syrian government through resettlement of Syrians within the country also impact voting. Additionally, Syrian citizenship is being granted to foreigners fighting in the conflict and denied to ethnic minorities such as Kurds. This practice bears significant political weight, especially during elections. Restrictions on voting can also be issues for people convicted of a ‘felony or dishonorable misdemeanor or that which shakes public trust’. As these offenses are not defined by the law, such restrictions are considered arbitrary decisions of the Syrian government. Overall, the lack of basic transparency in voter data prevents the analysis of Syrians’ participation in elections (International Foundation for Electoral Systems 2021, 16-18).

5. NARRATIVES AROUND A ‘POST-CONFLICT PHASE’

In technical terms, Syria does not have a national ceasefire. However, major military battles have stopped, casualty levels have largely diminished, and early recovery activities have begun. Yet, there is no consensus on whether Syria today should be seen as being in a conflict or post-conflict phase. Each side has their argument as to their point of view: the Syrian government promotes post-conflict narrative to avoid confrontation to of human rights and transitional justice issues, control access to and distribution of all humanitarian aid, and make progress on regional political normalization. A widely accepted post-conflict phase narrative could also incentivize countries hosting refugees to send them back (Bellintani 2022; Batrawi and Uzelac 2018). On the other hand, the UN and the Syrian opposition consider that the country is still in a state of conflict where the UN calls for a national ceasefire and a political solution. This controversy highlights various narratives on the present and future of Syria, which participate in shaping the forms in which the displaced participate in Syrian public affairs, according to the vision they have for the country. This section thus presents elements which were considered by interviewees as necessary to reach a post-conflict phase in Syria.

First, most respondents agreed that Syria was not in a post-conflict phase yet. While some mentioned that it had already been underway, they made it very clear that it was not a synonym for peace, and that the conflict tended to move towards a frozen one. Despite the intense military operations in Syria over the last decade, Syrian interviewees mentioned that Syria was not a safe country before 2011 either. Yet, all interviewees are participating in the Syrian civic and political spaces to design the future of their country. The following table therefore classifies the elements which participants see as necessary to move towards a post-conflict Syria, and eventually, a peaceful Syria.

The table is organized in order of category importance for interview participants. There was a diversity of opinions among interview respondents regarding which elements to prioritize to achieve peace: the departure of Assad was a first condition for several participants, and security elements were also prominent. The columns of the table should however not be treated separately since political, economic, social

and justice elements are interconnected, and participants were mentioning elements to be improved in several categories. In sum, interviewees had the impression that there were very few elements on which they were able to engage directly on, due to the internationalization of the conflict and the intransigence of the Syrian government. Yet, several mentioned elements as long-term goals around which they actively work, to prepare the grounds for when the political process moves forward.

Elements needed to move towards a post-conflict Syria, from participant interviews:

POLITICAL ELEMENTS	SECURITY ELEMENTS	RIGHTS BASED ELEMENTS	ECONOMIC ELEMENTS	SOCIAL COHESION ELEMENTS
Political negotiations and settlement, implementation of UNSCR 2254 Pressure on the government for more engagement in the political process	Stopping armed conflict between main military groups and ceasing of all violent acts Guarantee of non-recurrence of violence	Accountability of perpetrators for their crimes Ensure rule of law and justice	Improvement of infrastructure and reconstruction	Transmission of success stories of Syrians helping each other, e.g., after the earthquake
Withdrawal of foreign intervention Pressure on Russia, Iran and government by international community National ownership of the political process	Freedom of movement within Syria and inside-outside Removal of checkpoints	Commemoration of combatants and martyrs	Improvement of livelihoods for Syrians in the country	Long term healing in society Reconstruction of a national sense of identity Inclusive society
Departure of Assad, transitional and civil government	Ability to go back to Syria without detention risk	Rehabilitation of kids' generation to alleviate the effects of war on their future	Improvement of economic conditions for IDPs return	Civic participation with a focus on female and youth voices Capacity building for public participation of marginalized voices
New social contract and constitution guaranteeing rights for all people Democratic state to accommodate the cultural diversity Clear separation of powers		Respect of housing, land and property (HLP) rights	Investments and economic opportunities in Syria	Deconstruction of stereotypes between inside-outside Syrians
Countering corruption				Building sustainable peace

3 Participating far from home: The Syrian diaspora in Germany

This chapter provides in its first section a general overview of the context and types of engagement of the Syrian diaspora actors in Germany before delving into the motivations driving their endeavors, laid out in the second section. The third section discusses specific challenges induced by displacement for participation, and opportunities of displacement in Germany for involvement in Syrian affairs, as covered in the last section.

1. CONTEXT AND ACTIVITIES

The space for Syrian civil society has been growing for the last decade, not only within Syria but in neighboring countries and countries of refuge. An interviewed diaspora expert noted that the most influential Syrian diaspora groups are not located in Europe, but mostly in the United States where they are wealthier and well connected to economic actors, thus able to exert powerful advocacy on government actors. In Europe, the Syrian diaspora is rather active on the human rights and justice fronts. Many organizations and activists have therefore relocated to Germany, following migratory movements.

While the Syrian uprising in 2011 triggered a political consciousness among the diaspora in Germany and marked the emergence of its mobilization, it also created fragmentation along political lines, between the pro and anti-Assad. Yet, the escalation of the conflict resulted in an increased humanitarian activity by diaspora members. This shift is explained by the need to have an impact on the devastating conflict consequences, but also to find less conflicting grounds for action among diaspora actors and thus facilitate the obtention of funding and support (Ragab 2020, 181). This humanitarian focus also was the object of many donation campaigns organized by the diaspora.

This ‘humanitarization’ was however rooted in an apolitical character, which limits the ‘transformative potential of diaspora political entrepreneurs to become actors of political change in the country of origin’ (Ragab 2020, 179). The continuous emigration of opposition-oriented Syrians led to a ‘re-politicization’ of diasporic practices since many political activists in Syria pursued their endeavors in Germany, enabled by its relatively open migration policy for Syrians. They are aiming at building a democratic change inside Syria by various means, such as transnational activism, capacity development of Syrian civil society organizations, artistic and cultural productions to start conversations and challenge stereotypes, conducting consultations to highlight Syrian voices. A key goal of these diasporic practices is to maintain a Syrian identity and create a shared cultural basis to foster peacebuilding not only inside Syria but also among diaspora groups, as well as promoting dialogue, exchange and understanding among various diaspora groups and with the local population (Ragab 2020). Finally, some diaspora actors work towards a broader inclusion of marginalized voices in and around the peace process, through awareness raising about women’s rights and capacity building of young Syrians.

Humanitarian aid and support to refugees in Germany are still key activities of the diaspora, given the lack of perspectives for a conflict resolution. As the conflict lasted, some long-term development work such as supporting education, employment, livelihood opportunities and psychosocial support in Syria and neighboring countries emerged. Diaspora members also provide economic support to their relatives by sending remittances. Yet, activities differ in line with the fragmentation of diaspora actors: older generations, which were present in Germany before 2011 focus on humanitarian action within Syria, whereas younger people who were involved in the civil movements in Syria tend to feel more engaged on values of freedom and democracy promoted during the uprisings (Ragab 2020). Overall, the participation activities of the diaspora seem to be highly reactionary to events happening in Syria, such as the solidarity movements providing support after the earthquake of February 2023.

Opposition-oriented Syrian civil society actors are considered important in Germany and supported by public institutions, with the belief that they can represent a foundation for peace on the middle to long-run and could support a transformative process, if it were to happen. For instance, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Berghof Foundation supported the establishment of an umbrella organisation of German-Syrian relief organisations (Verband Deutsch-Syrischer Hilfsvereine eV, VDSH), regrouping 26 organizations and considered a strategic partner of German public institutions (Ragab and Katbeh 2017, 17; Badwi 2022). German authorities are generally sympathetic towards opposition-oriented Syrian civil society actors and support Track II initiatives.¹ Furthermore, an exchange between Syrian organizations, donors and policymakers to discuss suggestions and recommendations also took place in 2020.

2. MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

‘If we want solutions for a future Syria, we need to work towards them’

The devastating humanitarian crisis resulting from the Syrian conflict was a major motivation for diaspora actors to mobilize and contribute to alleviate the vast needs of people remaining in Syria. As mentioned, this humanitarian priority also enabled the engagement of diaspora actors who could not fully identify with the political struggle. Displacement to a safe country triggered feelings of responsibility, solidarity, and moral obligation to act (Ragab 2020, 164).

Regarding political activism, all Syrians interviewees residing in Germany were already engaged in the civic sphere before migrating, either before or during the uprisings. Yet displacement changed the nature of their activism, now more focused on fostering a sense of identity and community among Syrians rather than demanding domestic democratic reforms. Given the political deadlock, Syrians in Germany feel the need to organize independently to work towards the future of their country through civic action and peacebuilding activities. Diaspora members mentioned feelings of belonging and core values as their driver, such as the belief in human rights, democracy and their desire for justice through proving and documenting human rights violations. This aspect of belonging involved a responsibility to act, which was strong even if those Syrian citizens were not thinking of going back to Syria. Political motivations also drive their engagement, such as advocating to ‘make sure that European countries will never normalize relations with the Assad regime’.

¹ In peacebuilding theory, Track II was defined by Lederach as peace dialogue among middle-range leadership, between Track I, dialogue among top leadership, and Track III, dialogue among grassroots leadership (see Palmiano Federer et al. 2019)

as a Syrian interviewee mentioned, ‘to make a statement that this conduct is non-negotiable and not acceptable’. Finally, diaspora civil society actors believe that their participation is the best way to represent refugees in current circumstances, with their lost rights and memory, given the existing opposition structures fail to represent them adequately. Interview participants mentioned the need to work for the future Syria they want, as one of them put it: ‘Peace needs to be adapted to the people, otherwise it’s just paper. We need to present a clear future to governments, to show how peace could look like’.

However, the motivations of Syrians in Germany to participate in the affairs of their country tend to erode with time, as they are moving on with their lives, do not imagine themselves going back soon, and are losing hope as they feel that they cannot have an impact. Some are also ‘disgusted’ by the recent wave of diplomatic normalization with the Assad government, even if they were expecting it. This fatigue can also explain a shift in diasporic practices towards supporting the integration of refugees in Germany, and not participating in Syrian affairs.

3. CHALLENGES FOR EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF THE SYRIAN DIASPORA

‘Syrians come from every corner of the country to sit in Berlin: we put all backgrounds in a city and try to make them live together’

‘They could have a role to play if they managed to organize themselves: collaborating is the real challenge’

This section presents the challenges identified to the civic and political participation of Syrian diaspora actors in Germany. They are categorized according to the three levels of analysis presented in the previous chapter, with variables affecting the micro, meso and macro levels. The analysis shows that participation is not just dependent on the Syrian context, but also on the host country’s situation as well as the consequences of being displaced.

At the **micro level**, personal and emotional variables also influence motivations and possibilities for participation. While many interview participants felt emotionally bound to Syria and events unfolding there, they also expressed feelings of despair and powerlessness and therefore preferred to work on small-scale civic participation projects.

The displacement experience has also often been reported as difficult, as beyond the journey, newcomers had to get through long bureaucratic processes, get used to a new culture and language, and find ways to sustain themselves economically, which took a lot of energy and thus prevented engaging with Syrian affairs. Refugees mentioned the toll of this experience for their mental health and the difficulty of balancing between the Syrian and German aspects of their new lives, which pushed people away from participating. Focusing on youth involvement, a participant explained having found out that youth had little interest in participating in the peace process as long as their educational and professional needs were not fulfilled, or as they did not find their ‘internal peace’ after having suffered the consequences of war and displacement. Personal financial struggles also lead to an ‘economic’ character of civic participation: if Syrians are not able to ensure a stable income, working for Syrian civil society organizations can become an opportunity, which disadvantages smaller structures which do not have enough funds to pay staff, and which was reported as less ‘genuine’

than someone participating out of conviction for the cause. Moreover, participants reported that many Syrians in Germany were not interested in participation in the first place as they want to move on with their lives and leave Syrian-related issues behind, noting that they were also not interested in public life before migrating. Someone also mentioned the lack of need to participate, as they were finally living in a country where rights and freedom were granted.

While women have structurally less space in public affairs, participants explained that being a woman in the diaspora made participation somewhat easier than in Syria and noted the gradual increase of women's participation. They nevertheless mentioned that it was dependent on the intersection of age and family situation. Yet, several networks comprised of women and/or especially working on women's rights, women's representation, and gender-sensitive peacebuilding are active between Syria and Germany, such as the Syrian Women's Political Movement or the Syrian Women's League.

Finally, as participation has not benefitted from an open culture in Syria, participants mentioned not having been socialized to take part in civic or political participation and struggling to explain their endeavors to their families. Additionally, there remains a fear from the Assad government monitoring activities abroad, especially of threats for their families in Syria or for themselves if they are travelling to the country, all which disincentivizes participation.

The **meso level** considers social and organizational challenges, such as fragmentation of diaspora actors, which is high in Germany according to existing literature and most interview participants. Intersections of class, professional, gender, political and ethnic differences produce various social positions and identities that influence the participation as well as the dynamics of diaspora groups (Ragab 2020). While most diaspora actors in Germany are against the government, there are a few pro-Assad and pro-Hezbollah groups who either came refugees, are part of the Lebanese diaspora, or who were sent by the Syrian government to cause trouble, especially through the Belarus route. While pro-Assad groups are not publicly active and there are very little relationships between pro and anti-Assad groups (Ragab 2020), their presence creates polarization and unsafe spaces, especially for opposition-oriented refugees who want to speak out, for instance on the government's crimes. As an interview participant put it, 'there are so many Syrians in Germany that you don't know who is who'. The anti-government diaspora groups also experience great fragmentation, manifesting for instance in divergences regarding whether dialogue should be conducted with the government or not, whether to engage with civil society active in government-controlled areas or how to define what is civil society overall.

Syrians who emigrated before the conflict are generally described as highly educated and well-integrated in the German society, as opposed to newcomers who occupy lower socio-economic level and are thus perceived as receiving too much social welfare benefits and representing a threat to the social status acquired by earlier generations. Moreover, the younger immigrant generation has been actively involved in the Syrian uprisings and have lived experiences of the conflict, resulting in demands for a deeper societal, democratic change in Syria compared to older generations (Ragab 2020, 150; Badwi 2022). Generations are also said to have a different understanding of politics: a participant explained that while their parents were afraid of talking politics and participating, they consider being involved in politics as their right. Young people tend to make it a personal mission to work towards peace, as they have suffered the most from the conflict, whereas older generations are perceived as experiencing more fatigue from the conflict.

Moreover, the general lack of trust among Syrians prevents the construction of a unified movement. Interview participants reported the difficulty of working with other Syrians due to their experience growing up in a culture of suspicion and fear of informants, adding to the overall lack of freedom of expression in Syria. This fear has survived over decades and travelled to Germany, because a culture of trust has never been built. Participants mentioned having never learnt to work together, resulting among others from the limited space for civil society in Syria and the lack of democratic culture. This might explain the current focus of diaspora actors on community building activities. Nevertheless, there is a deep desire to overcome this lack of trust and collaborate across organizations. A positive example depicted as a model, the Syrian diaspora in the United States was mentioned by an interviewee, highlighting their well-structured organization and consequently the influence they exerted on the adoption of sanctions towards the Syrian government.

Overall, the fragmentation and lack of trust among Syrian groups prevent an efficient organization and strategic orientation of diaspora activities. As a result, the lack of mobilizing structures prevents building collective diasporic consciousness and hinders participation. Finally, interview participants mentioned the need to have prominent figures representing refugees, as their specific struggles can best be understood by those who are going through similar experiences.

While the **macro level** seems generally favorable to opposition-oriented diaspora participation as Germany enables them access to political institutions and supports them in different forms, the current political context impacts the civic and political participation in displacement as it is conditioned by the host country's interests and positions.

A key obstacle to participation mentioned across many interviews was the difficulty in accessing funding. Funding shortfalls were considered 'critical', and are leading to an environment of competition rather than cooperation among, adding to the existing divides (Ragab 2020). Since the formal political process is a stalemate, its exposure is not as important as it used to be and money thus goes into other crisis contexts, instead of supporting activities at other tracks around the Syrian peace process. The international community was perceived by interview participants as reluctant to spend money in developing other entities to replace the non-functional existing political process.

Syrian diaspora actors regularly engage with German public institutions on peace-related issues: for instance, Syrian human rights lawyers – supported by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights – contributed to launching universal jurisdiction cases against members of the Syrian government in the framework of the Koblenz trial, by identifying perpetrators and testifying in court (ECCHR 2022). Diaspora members also conduct advocacy towards Western states' governments to keep Syrian issues on the agenda, for instance during the European Union organized Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region'. In Germany, they have been successful in increasing government funding for humanitarian aid and in supporting Syrian opposition actors.

An important concern highlighted by research participants is the threat of Syria being considered a safe place for return: while the European stance is currently not considering normalizing relations with the Syrian government 'without meaningful progress in implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 2254' nor support organized returns 'unless there are credible guarantees that those returns are

voluntary and monitored by the international community' (European External Action Service EEAS 2023), the tendency to encourage forced returns and the rise of narratives considering migration as a security issue – pushed by the rise of far-right parties all over the continent – are concerning. The question of return remains central in terms of advocacy goals: not only to prevent the recognition of Syria as a safe place for return, but also to support safe, dignified, and voluntary return possibilities.

Participation of Syrian diaspora is also dependent on the public opinion: along the evolution of the Syrian conflict and the rise of Daesh, the public discourse shifted the framing of the Syrian conflict from a democratic to a sectarian struggle, and a fatigue for the Syrian issue and its refugees emerged. As a result, some organizations decided to present themselves as adhering to the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality to be able to generate funding from big donors (Ragab 2020). A Syria expert mentioned that while media attention on Syria has been decreasing since the beginning of the war in Ukraine – with a brief exception during the earthquake – giving Syrians the impression of being forgotten, German state institutions are still actively following the topic and keeping their stable support for the country. However, if the normalization wave were to continue and Assad expanded its influence inside Syria, entities supporting opposition-oriented diaspora actors in Germany would need to reevaluate the role and objectives of the diaspora.

Overall, Germany lacks peace education programs for immigrants to participate in civic engagement for peace in their countries of origin, since the focus of existing programs lies in fostering individual peace skills for the integration in Germany or reintegration in the origin country after return. Focusing on Syrian and Afghan diasporas, Mielke and Meininghaus explain that this shortcoming is due to a perception of refugees being beneficiaries of social benefits rather than individuals with political agency. Additionally, consultations involving them regarding the affairs of their origin countries focus on humanitarian or development issues, neglecting political aspirations. Finally, a funding line allowing diaspora members to initiate peace initiatives for their country from Germany is non-existent. This lack of tailored support for peace initiatives for Syria prevents concrete, broad-based programs and long-term visions for reform in the Syrian peace processes (Mielke and Meininghaus 2021).

At a more practical level, while still connected to their country, the Syrian displaced in Germany can only rely on limited access to information regarding what is happening inside and have difficulties connecting with Syrians living in other countries. The complexity of the Syrian context and lack of transparency complicates the access to accurate information and keeping an overview on developments in various places has been qualified as exhausting. These difficulties risk giving the actions of outside Syrian a hollow and disconnected character, as was for instance mentioned after the earthquake: while aid was slowly coming in, it was not matching the needs on the ground. This restricted access to information highlights the importance of conducting consultation on various topics with Syrians residing in different places, to better inform advocacy strategies and convey their voices (see for instance Badwi 2023; Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity 2020).

4. OPPORTUNITIES OF DISPLACEMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

‘Investing in the diaspora means investing in the future, as it will help building sustainable peace’

Besides challenges for mobilization in the civic and political spaces – significantly impacted by displacement – interview participants underscored opportunities for participation enabled by living in a country such as Germany.

First, Germany was reported to provide a feeling of safety, with the lived experience of enjoying freedom and democracy being very different than reading about it. With a better access to resources and a closer access to policymakers, these open new possibilities for activism compared to Syria or the neighboring countries. Daily life in Germany was also seen as a learning experience by participants – for instance about the functioning of parties and elections, the history of reunification, or just experiencing a different culture – who believed that they could collectively bring back a lot of expertise to Syria on the long term. Moreover, the skills training and education the displaced could benefit from in Germany were also considered to contribute to peacebuilding efforts. The relatively safe and encouraging space for civil society activity enables organizations to gather more experience than they could in Syria. Ragab and Katbeh even consider that European host countries ‘can provide a safe and neutral space for rapprochement, reflection and dialogue among the diverse range of Syrian diaspora actors, highlighting the potential role of diasporas as agents of change and peace’ (Ragab and Katbeh 2017, 4).

This potential for peace resonates with the fact that living in the diaspora is an opportunity to interact and cooperate with Syrians from other backgrounds – despite previously mentioned challenges. A diaspora member reported that organizations supporting refugees were comprised of people from different groups, without ethnic or sectarian fragmentation, the divisions lying rather in pro or anti-Assad orientations. In her research, Ragab found that Syrians in Germany perceived their fragmentation as weakening their collective political mobilization as well as their power towards the German government, thus feeling a strong desire for cohesiveness, trust, and dialogue (Ragab 2020).

4 So close yet so far: IDPs' participation

As mentioned above, the civic and political participation of IDPs is very little researched and documented. This chapter is attempting to shed a ray of light on IDPs' participation in Syria, especially in non-government-controlled areas, despite having little access to information and with the awareness of important context specificities. Like the previous chapter, the first section will cover context and activities related to IDPs' participation, followed by their motivations and challenges for participation. Lastly, some opportunities for participation arising from internal displacement will be outlined.

1. CONTEXT AND ACTIVITIES

Divisions among communities in Syria were already existing before the war, with a low sense of collective identity, except for minority groups such as Kurds (Diker and Ragab 2019). Existing regional dichotomies were aggravated by conflict dynamics and displacement, which results in an important fragmentation. Indeed, internal displacement can either result in a relative mixing of communities – with IDPs settling in specific neighborhoods, often separated from the host community – or in an 'ethnic homogenization' due to population swaps aiming at producing demographic changes. While many IDPs fled their homes because of the conflict, groups were forcibly displaced by the authorities to government-controlled areas, aiming at neutralizing perceived potential dissent in former opposition strongholds (Batrawi and Uzelac 2018). In government-controlled areas, an interviewee reported that Syrian authorities would take advantage of IDPs' presence by placing displaced individuals loyal to them in position of power, aiming at politicizing displacement.

This regionalist trend is also reflected in civil society's work, as it was found in 2021 that no civil society organization from northwest Syria was working in government-controlled areas, and four civil society organizations working in the northwest were also working in the northeast. In total, one percent of the surveyed CSOs were operating in more than one area of control. Security risks and lack of trust complicated the attempts of civil society to foster connections across lines of control, according to a 'whole of Syria' approach. Attempts for cross-line cooperation thus happen through informal contacts (Syrian Civil Society Network Platform 2022, 7). Civil society working on governance, political and human rights issues is reportedly working in the backlines, not in the frontlines like humanitarians, which leads to cooperation happening outside of the country, on international platforms for instance.

Overall, IDPs' participation both in Northeast and Northwest Syria was reported to be a 'façade', not substantial. Nevertheless, this research aims at highlighting IDPs' voices playing a role in civic and political participation. The interviewed IDPs conduct various activities such as capacity building and political awareness raising, with workshops on governance types, elections, forms of states. They also touch upon the current Syrian political process, against the backdrop of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and give room for people to understand and make suggestions related to peacebuilding. Some interviewees were especially building the capacity of women and promoting women's rights. Others focused on building a common heritage through theater, language, and culture-related activities. Given the difficult living

conditions in Syria, many civil society actors work in providing emergency relief or rehabilitating infrastructure.

Given the political context, it was very difficult to find information about international engagement related to civic and political participation of IDPs in non-government-controlled areas, since if it exists, it has a low visibility. Overall, Syrian actors are generally considered by international NGOs as beneficiaries and service providers rather than fully-fledged partners: local organizations conduct 75% of all aid delivery and yet receive below 1% of total direct aid (Syrian Civil Society Network Platform 2022, 11).

2. MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION

'Personally, I participate a lot: to compensate for the loss of capacity and brain drain, you have to work multiple times the amount you normally should.'

The motivations for participation of respondents inside Syria were oriented towards core beliefs and values, which were a strong driver given the difficult conditions. For most, civic participation equated to contributing to a peaceful political transition, preventing a loss of identity and a brain drain. An IDP also mentioned a moral responsibility to act: for them, it was either being arrested, injured, dying, or continuing working in public affairs, even if that is the most difficult thing to do, but anything else would give them a feeling of treason for those whose blood has been drawn. Some also mentioned not having taken opportunities of leaving the country, as they preferred to stay.

At a more operational level, another motivation was to gather the needs, aspirations and recommendations of the people to ensure an efficient implementation of the political solution. IDPs were also said to represent regional diversity within Syria, thus working on building more tolerance at the local level. Working on IDPs' participation could prevent their alienation in host communities, preserve their dignity, and enable them to exert civic and political rights.

3. CHALLENGES FOR IDPS' PARTICIPATION

'People inside Syria don't care about politics, they care about how they will secure food for their family'

This section will apply the same framework as diaspora mobilization to analyze the civic and political participation of internally displaced people, categorizing challenges into micro, meso and macro levels.

Research interviews have shown that the main challenges for IDPs' civic and political participation lie at the **micro level** and relate to their economic situation. IDPs often suffer from dire living situations and face a deteriorating economy, after having lost their productive assets and livelihoods. Participants reported that IDPs often have less access to public services such as health and education, and difficulties finding housing. Yet they need to have their basic needs covered before being able to participate, as civic participation mostly means volunteering. Respondents were indicating that participation would increase if the economic situation allowed it, since they cannot afford long-term worries. Yet, the economic is not the only obstacle to participation: Syrians also need to be educated on civic and political engagement

– such as how free and fair elections should unfold or the importance of political parties – since they have not been exposed to it in the past decades.

Further, for IDPs to participate in such discussions, they need to be convinced that their participation is key to a political solution, but most people lost belief in the process given the lack of progress. The significant psychological effect of having been displaced, having lost too many relatives, and having lived in dire situations dampens hope. A respondent explained that ‘as an IDP, you have to start from scratch, your identity is removed from you’. Moreover, participants reported not having felt safe as their region could at any moment fall back under government control, or they could become victims of forced returns to an insecure area.

Despite being displaced in their own country, participants explained feeling like strangers in their host area, limiting their space for participation in public life. Losing social circles, experiencing difficulties in integrating and discriminations based on regionalism as well as struggling to build new connections were cited as obstacles to participating, reaching leadership positions, and even feeling safe. Interviewees explained that benefiting from basic connections was vital in case of trouble: a respondent reported ‘feeling like a tree without roots’.

Finally, gender is another barrier to IDPs participation. This was explained by women having a more important role at home, whereas men are outside more often which makes it easier to participate. An interviewee organizing trainings mentioned an attendance of 80% men and 20% women. While people tend to ask more questions when a woman is active in the public space, a respondent highlighted that she increased her already existing participation after having become an IDP, and that dealing with external criticism was a matter of personal motivation. Both men and women highlighted the importance of women’s participation so as to have a diversity of voices, just like having people from different socio-economic backgrounds and ages. However, women are still generally less represented, as an interviewee put it: ‘the bigger barrier for participation is between men and women, not between an IDP and a local’.

The **meso level** brought to light the tensions existing between IDPs and host communities as a challenge to IDPs’ participation. Even for IDPs living outside of camps, participants mentioned the difficulty of overcoming the IDP social status and becoming part of the local community. This prevents them from raising their voices, as they still consider themselves as guests, therefore less legitimate to participate. Moreover, ethnic differences can also cause tensions, for instance between Kurds and Arabs, given the crimes that have been committed between members of these groups during the conflict.

Further, differences in political priorities were highlighted between IDPs and local communities: locals tend to focus on reaching peace, and IDPs on proper conditions for returning. While most IDPs are against the government and wish for a democratic system, there are also divergences among them regarding the form of this democratic system and internal disputes related to the grievances of past crimes. These tensions are not surprising given the already weak sense of a collective identity before the conflict. Research participants labeled it a ‘vacuum’, referring to the lack of Syrian social identity to replace Assad. Additionally, the political awareness of Syrians is generally low after having lived for decades in a restrictive environment. As a result, interviewees reported conducting dialogue initiatives at a local level with the aim of bridging divergences.

The **macro level** considers legal and political challenges hindering IDPs' participation. From a legal perspective, the main obstacle for IDPs' participation is the local administration election laws which prevent IDPs from participating in Local Administrative Councils. The internally displaced are not allowed either to run or to elect the council's members. Interviewees mentioned that projects were on their way to amend these laws and ensure the right to participation to IDPs, as many of them have been residing in the region for a decade. Members of local councils in regions previously held by the opposition and who were displaced are attempting to preserve the structure of their councils in displacement. These councils mainly focus on discussing issues related to displaced people from their region of origin, advocating for them, representing them towards the host community. While they also manage camps and provide education and social activities, displaced councils cannot be fully operational as executive bodies.

Displaced councils are also reportedly interested in engaging in conversations about the constitutional and political processes, awareness raising and dialogue workshops. Participants explained that these bodies were maintained by a hope of going back to the origin region and having a functional administrative body which they can build on. IDPs who were in leadership positions before displacement are also considered valuable to govern in a future Syria, hence the importance of preserving their voices. Even if they are not allowed to participate in local councils, IDPs are still organizing capacity building activities on how to run for local elections, with the hope of being allowed to do so in the future. The need to conduct political awareness towards IDPs to highlight their rights of being represented and the importance of their participation was emphasized. A root obstacle to IDPs' participation is the culture of elite participation, resulting in a missing framework defining the relationship between local authorities and the internally displaced. Low possibilities for participation therefore do not result from systematic marginalization, but rather from a lack of attention.

Further, participation is hampered by the lack of possession or recognition of IDPs' papers such as identification documents or diplomas. This prevents them moving around freely, but also reaching relevant positions in decision-making. Moreover, a lot of positions require local staff, even in civic participation activities.

From a political perspective, IDPs cited the poor identification with figures representing the Syrian opposition as a factor preventing participation. They mentioned not feeling represented and not having leaders able to convey legitimacy and political values of the people inside Syria. They called for a change of these figures and mentioned the need to create an environment where people can trust the Syrian opposition. This aspect was considered key to convince people inside Syria of believing in a political solution and thus to be able to put pressure on the government. Further, observers mentioned that the Syrian context is not yet ripe to discuss the involvement of the internally displaced given the lack of engagement from the Syrian authorities and resulting stagnancy of the UN political process. Finally, political conditions such as the threat of forced returns, normalization, the lack of international support and dire perspectives for younger generations prevent a strategic engagement and meaningful civic and political participation of internally displaced and Syrians inside the country in general.

4. OPPORTUNITIES OF DISPLACEMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Despite the abovementioned challenges to civic and political participation of the internally displaced, IDPs interviewees surprisingly pointed out positive effects of displacement on their engagement. While they depreciated political participation – considered a dead-end – they spoke highly of civic participation and its potential for increasing tolerance, living together and serving peacebuilding objectives. IDPs mentioned that it was easier for them to participate in civic and political spaces in non-government-controlled areas as they were not fearing government repression.

In non-government-controlled areas, local administrations generally lack human resources. An interviewee thus mentioned the possibility for IDPs to fill high ranking or official positions. This was reported to be more feasible in the Northeast as compared to the Northwest, given the wider military presence in Northwest governance, leading to more factionalism, bigotry and animosity. Despite constant security challenges, this interviewee explained the relatively better possibilities for civic and political participation in the Northeast due to more ‘bridge building’ practices towards IDPs.

Being an IDP was also reported as positive by women, as they do not face the social stigma for being active in public affairs as they would in their place of origin. Displacement also gives them a new opportunity to work with women from diverse backgrounds. This regional diversity was depicted as positive, inspiring and as a symbol of resilience. A participant explained that these intercultural interactions were an opportunity to bring a positive image from their area of origin, involving feelings of pride, which can be considered positive in the highly fragmented Syrian context. Finally, the ‘outsider position’ was also perceived as beneficial to maintain a distance to local animosities and to being in a mediating position between different actors, as IDPs are not concerned by long-standing grievances.

5 Conclusion: The civic and political rights of the displaced, a tool for peace?

'When we bring them together in sessions, they explain to each other their different situations and start to build bridges between each other. We need this for the future'

In conclusion, this research explored the civic and political participation of displaced Syrians in the affairs of their country, with a focus on the Syrian diaspora in Germany and the internally displaced in non-government-controlled areas. It showed that displaced Syrians tend to focus on civic, informal forms of participation given the lack of structures to exert formal political participation. Reviewing challenges for participation, they mostly relate to fragmentation and organizational issues for the Syrian diaspora in Germany, while for IDPs they originate from personal difficulties in meeting basic daily needs. However, for both groups, this paper attempted to show the multi-layered character of obstacles to participation, related to the displacement situation and the complex political situation. On the flipside of such challenges, the research uncovered how displacement may also provide opportunities for participation, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to meet and collaborate, and serving as an avenue for tolerance building and the expansion of Syrian civil society's activities to build sustainable peace in their country. Overall, Syrian civil society appears to have developed in displacement – internal or external – embracing and conveying various voices.

While diaspora mobilization attempts to preserve the connection to the country of origin, this comparative research also unveils a growing disconnect between Syrians inside and outside of the country. Indeed, in addition to daily life priorities being very different, interview participants reported that finding a political solution to the conflict was more pressing for internally displaced people or for refugees in neighboring countries such as Turkey or Lebanon, given the worse security conditions and the fear of forced return, than for members of the diaspora in Europe. Beyond different political priorities, a deep divide exists in perceptions of each other: building on the analysis of literature and interviews, it appears that Syrians who stayed in the country perceive outside Syrians as having favored their individual interests and projects over fighting for the country and resisting the war, failing inside Syrians who are paying the high price of the conflict, enjoying a safe life with social benefits and not even feeling Syrian anymore. Syrians outside reportedly perceive inside Syrians as unskilled people, criminals, or having chosen either suicide or a slow death (Badwi 2022).

This national division has been reported as a major obstacle to the construction of a collective belonging given the extent of disagreements on core political issues, such as the concept of patriotism and the definition of a Syrian identity (Badwi 2022). This divide is reflected by the fact that the Syrian diaspora in Germany cannot speak for all Syrians and seems increasingly disconnected from the country and its daily realities. It would then be wrong to assume that the Syrian diaspora could fulfil a 'spokesperson' function for all Syrians. The gap between inside and outside is reportedly growing with time in parallel to diaspora members integrating in their host societies. For this reason, multiple interviewees highlighted the need for initiatives

to rebuild relationships between Syrians in various locations, whereas some similar initiatives are already underway. Some have created spaces connecting Syrians inside and the outside the country to get to know each other's realities, identify common ground and address topics such as rights in displacement and national identity. A major challenge necessary to reach meaningful exchanges is trust building among participants, but such spaces are crucial to exchange views on key issues such as perspectives on democracy and Syria's future.

In light of these findings, I argue that the restricted civic and political participation of the displaced remains a hinderance to restoring social cohesion among Syrians. As Van Hear and Cohen (2017) opined, a diaspora on the losing side will resist the victor's perception of an imagined community and keep their own. This paper therefore suggests fostering formal, political participation, at the international level with the expansion of accessible out-of-country voting for national elections and supporting informal participation through engagement with diaspora. The diverse and political character of Syrian diaspora actors in Germany represent a fertile soil for peacebuilding.

Formal participation at the local level should be fostered through IDPs' participation in the Local Administrative Councils. Informal engagement can be reinforced by enabling cooperation channels across conflict lines, using a 'whole-of-Syria' approach. The political potential of IDPs as an opposition-oriented social constituency should be acknowledged and their representation on high-visibility platforms reinforced. Despite a decade of war and the life-changing consequences of forced displacement, all Syrian interviewees still believe in a peaceful solution to the conflict. Civic and political rights of the displaced should thus be considered as a necessary tool to move towards a national reconciliation on different levels of various political processes, at home or internationally.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margot Mayoraz worked with swisspeace on the peace-migration nexus as a Mercator Fellow. The Mercator Kolleg is a program supporting young professionals in conducting their own projects in globally active organizations.

Previously, Margot worked as a Mercator Fellow for the Danish Refugee Council in Jordan and interned at the Embassy of Switzerland in Thailand. She holds a Master's degree in Development Studies from the Geneva Graduate Institute and the American University in Cairo, and a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Geneva.

6 Bibliography and further references

- Badwi, Ehab. 2022. 'Syrians in Exile: Challenges of Building a Diaspora Community in Germany'. Medium (blog). 14 December 2022. <https://ehab-badwi.medium.com/syrians-in-exile-challenges-of-building-a-diaspora-community-in-germany-24fa6f7864b5>.
2023. 'SYA Consultation: The Perception of Young Men and Women on Gender Equality, Women's Rights, and Women's Participation.' Syrian Youth Assembly (blog). 27 January 2023. <https://www.syrian-youth.org/sya-consultation-the-perception-of-young-men-and-women-on-gender-equality-womens-rights-and-womens-participation/>.
- Batravi, Samar, and Ana Uzelac. 2018. 'Four Ways in Which the Syrian Regime Controls Refugee Return'. Clingendael Institute.
- Bekaj, Armend, and Lina Antara. 2018. Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2018.19>.
- Bellintani, Veronica. 2022. 'The Assad Regime's Post-Conflict Narrative in the International Arena'. Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (blog). 10 May 2022. <https://timep.org/2022/05/10/the-assad-regimes-post-conflict-narrative-in-the-international-arena/>.
- CNN. 2023. 'For Syrian Refugees, Assad's Rehabilitation Prompts Fear of Forced Return'. CNN. 10 May 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/10/middleeast/syria-refugees-fear-assad-rehabilitation-mime-intl/index.html>.
- Diker, Eleni, and Nora Jasmin Ragab. 2019. 'Diaspora Mobilization in Contexts of Political Uncertainties. Exploring the Potentials, Limits and Roles of the Syrian Civil Society in the Middle East and Europe'. Maastricht University/UNU-MERIT.
- ECCHR. 2022. 'First Criminal Trial Worldwide on Torture in Syria'. European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights. 2022. <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/first-criminal-trial-worldwide-on-torture-in-syria-before-a-german-court/>.
- Eleiba, Ahmed, Dominique Fraser, Justine Boillat, and Amanda Milani. 2016. 'Syrian Civil Society Cooperation, Challenges and Opportunities'. Graduate Institute Geneva, Geoexpertise.
- European External Action Service EEAS. 2023. 'The Conditions Are Not Met to Change the EU's Policy on Syria'. 18 June 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/conditions-are-not-met-change-eu%E2%80%99s-policy-syria_en.
- Geoff, Gilbert. 2018. 'Political Participation of Refugees in Their Country of Nationality'. Division of International Protection, UNHCR.
- Global Protection Cluster, and Carter Center. 2018. 'Public and Political Participation of Internally Displaced Persons'.

- Hajjar, Bahjat, Mazen Gharibah, Mazhar Sharbaji, Corinne Von Burg, Martina Santschi, and Leila Hilal. 2017. 'Perceptions of Governance - The Experience of Local Administrative Councils in Opposition-Held Syria'. swisspeace and Local Administration Council Unit.
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems. 2021. 'Assessment of the Syrian 2021 Presidential Election'. International Foundation for Electoral Systems.
- Janmyr, Maja. 2015. 'Refugees and Peace'. In *Promoting Peace Through International Law*, 252–73. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.5057.6725>.
- Mielke, Katja, and Esther Meininghaus. 2021. 'Engaging Refugees and Migrants as Peace Advocates'.
- Palmiano Federer, Julia, Julia Pickhardt, Philipp Lustenberger, Christian Altpeter, and Katrina Abatis. 2019. 'Beyond the Tracks? Reflections on Multitrack Approaches to Peace Processes', December.
- Ragab, Nora Jasmin. 2020. 'Diaspora Mobilisation in a Conflict Setting: The Emergence and Trajectories of Syrian Diaspora Mobilisation in Germany'. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20200424nr>.
- Ragab, Nora Jasmin, and Amer Katbeh. 2017. 'Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe - Mapping Their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom', January. https://www.academia.edu/35557428/Syrian_Diaspora_Groups_in_Europe_Mapping_their_engagement_in_Denmark_France_Germany_Sweden_Switzerland_and_the_United_Kingdom.
- Syrian Association for Citizen's Dignity. 2020. 'Elections Survey Results'. Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (blog). 2020. <https://syacd.org/elections-survey-results/>.
- Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity. 2021a. 'Safe Environment Before Everything Else: Why Elections in Syria Are Illegitimate without a Political Solution'.
- 2021b. 'Can Elections Be Held in Syria in Light of the Displacement of Half of the Syrian People and the Absence of Any Political Solution?' 25 May 2021. <https://syacd.org/can-elections-be-held-in-syria-in-light-of-the-displacement-of-half-of-the-syrian-people-and-the-absence-of-any-political-solution/>.
- Syrian Civil Society Network Platform. 2022. 'Overcoming Challenges Faced by Syrian Diaspora Civil Society Networks'.
- Talmon, Stefan. 2021. 'Germany Bans Syrian Embassy in Berlin from Holding Presidential Elections'. GPIL - German Practice in International Law (blog). 18 June 2021. <https://gpil.jura.uni-bonn.de/2021/06/germany-bans-syrian-embassy-in-berlin-from-holding-presidential-elections/>.
- The Day After. 2022. 'Electoral Reform and Democratic Transition in Syria - Abridged Report'.
- Toivanen, Mari, and Bahar Baser. 2020. 'Diasporas' Multiple Roles in Peace and Conflict: A Review of Current Debates'. *Migration Letters* 17 (1): 47–57. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v17i1.753>.

UN DPPA. 2021. 'Syrian Civil Society Voices: A Critical Part of the Political Process'. Politically Speaking, The Online Magazine of the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (blog). 2 July 2021. <https://dppa.medium.com/syrian-civil-society-voices-a-critical-part-of-the-political-process-353dce4dbfc9>.

UNHCR. 2022a. 'Refugee Statistics'. UNHCR. 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.

2022b. 'Syrian Arab Republic'. Operational Data Portal - Refugee Situations. 31 May 2022. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/syr>.

United Nations Security Council. 2015. Resolution 2254 (2015). S/RES/2254 (2015).

Van Hear, Nicholas, and Robin Cohen. 2017. 'Diasporas and Conflict: Distance, Contiguity and Spheres of Engagement'. *Oxford Development Studies* 45 (2): 171–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2016.1160043>.

swisspeace publications

WORKING PAPERS

CHF 15.– plus postage & packing

03.2023, Esther Wiesmann

Diaspora Mobilization for Truth-Seeking: The Case of the Colombian Diaspora in Switzerland

02.2023, Claudia González García

The Search for Truth in Spain: Debates Around the Creation of a Truth Commission

01.2023, Andrea Grossenbacher

EU Migration Governance as Protracted Conflict

03.2022, Claske Dijkema, Ayla Korajac

Urban peace, a spatial approach: In search for peacescapes in the post-war city of Brčko

02.2022, Lisa Ott and co-authors

The Search for Victims of Enforced Disappearance: A multidisciplinary exploration of current practices

01.2022, Sonia Garzon Ramirez

Mapping the Horizon of Transformative Peace

01.2021, Sara Abdel Latif

The Families of the Missing in Lebanon

01.2020, Toon Dirx

The Institutional Legacies of Rebel Governance

08.2019, Somaly Kum

How Do Donors Shape Transitional Justice in Cambodia?
Cambodia Working Paper Series

07.2019, Sovann Mam

Beyond the Khmer Rouge Tribunal: Addressing a Lack of Reconciliation at the Community Level
Cambodia Working Paper Series

06.2019, Sotheary You

Guarantees of Non-Recurrence of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Women after the Khmer Rouge
Cambodia Working Paper Series

05.2019, Kimsan Soy & Vandamet Hing

Upholding the Right to Lawyer: Lessons Learned from the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia
Cambodia Working Paper Series

04.2019 Samphoas Huy

Translating Global Norms: the Role of NGOs in Transitional Justice in Cambodia
Cambodia Working Paper Series

03.2019, Boravin Tann & Khuochsopheaktra Tim

'Duty Not to Forget' the Past? Perceptions of Young Cambodians on
the Memorialization of the Khmer Rouge Regime
Cambodia Working Paper Series

02.2019 Sibel Gürler & Joschka Philipps

Judicial Reform and Civil Society in Guinea

01.2019 Laurie Nathan

The Ties That Bind: Peace Negotiations, Credible Commitment and
Constitutional Reform

04.2018 Friederike Mieth

Transitional Justice and SocialTransformation

